

+ MIDNIGHT MASS

December 25, 2016

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit Amen.

At that time: there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled...And Joseph also went up from Galilee...

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear sons,

Something very big was at work in the Roman Empire some two thousand years ago—and something very small. One man ruled over all the nations of the earth conquered by the Romans; the other was just trying to make ends meet, while providing for an expectant mother. No mortal ever wielded greater worldly power than the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus; never was any human being less powerful, or less influential, at least in the eyes of the world, than Saint Joseph, the very chaste husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And yet, nonetheless, the business of the obscure man, of the small man, of the little man, was of far greater impact than that of the political head of all the civilized world—“at that time.”

Who ever could have guessed? While Caesar busied himself with a census of all his subjects, delegating responsibility for this to various officers in charge of the many and vast provinces of the Empire (it was a certain Quirinius or Cyrinus who presided over the census in Palestine), the very humble carpenter from Galilee marshaled into service his one subject, a donkey, upon which he placed his virginal spouse, in order to make the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where those of the family and tribe of David were to be enrolled. In those days the Jewish people suffered under the yoke of the Romans: they did not as they pleased, but as they were commanded. Saint Joseph was anything but a revolutionary: he obeyed the order of the Emperor about the census, despite the very great inconvenience this caused him, the time of year being the middle of winter and the material means of which he disposed for the journey being very modest. Nevertheless, this humble, this obscure Saint Joseph, accompanied by his young wife along the road to Bethlehem, bore with him a secret treasure, a dread and wonderful secret such that had the Emperor himself known about it, he would surely have paled with anxiety for the future of his immense realm.

Once arrived in little Bethlehem, the town described by the prophet Micah as the “least of the clans of Judah,”¹ things were not looking very prosperous at all. Did this Joseph not have at least some family ties in the town? Did he not have enough money even to secure a small room somewhere? It seems not, for the biblical narrative tells us that the family had to settle for the night in a shelter for animals. And in what distress! “While they were there the time came for her to have her child, explains Saint Luke, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.”²

¹ Micah 5:2.

² Lk. 2:6-7.

If ever in the history of the world there was a “family moment,” this was it. The picture is quite complete: a husband, a wife, a new-born, amid all the vulnerability of simple people not having considerable financial means or social status. They are not exactly a typical family, since the actual Father of the baby was a Divine Person, the Eternal Father, and not Saint Joseph, but this Holy Family remains, all the same, in its transcendence, a model for every human family, one very much needed in our day.

There is an authentic prophecy of Sister Lucia of Fatima on the question of the family in our time. In an interview given on February 16, 2008, Cardinal Carlo Caffara, then Archbishop of Bologna in Italy, spoke of this prophetic insight of the Carmelite Nun.

At the start of [a] work entrusted to me by the Servant of God John Paul II [i.e. to plan and establish the Pontifical Institute for the Studies on Marriage and the Family], I wrote to Sister Lucia of Fatima through her Bishop as I couldn't do so directly. Inexplicably however, since I didn't expect an answer seeing that I had only asked for prayers, I received a very long letter with her signature – now in the Institute's archives. In it we find written: *the final battle between the Lord and the reign of Satan will be about marriage and the family. Don't be afraid*, she added, *because anyone who works for the sanctity of marriage and the family will always be fought and opposed in every way, because this is the decisive issue*. And then she concluded: *however, Our Lady has already crushed [Satan's] head*.

To which the Cardinal adds these interesting remarks:

Talking...to John Paul II, one felt too that this was the crux, as it touches the very pillar of creation, the truth of the relationship between man and woman among the generations. If the founding pillar is weakened the entire building collapses, and we see this now: we are at this point and we know it. I'm also moved when I read in the best biographies of Padre Pio, how this man was so attentive to the sanctity of marriage and the sanctity of the spouses, even with justifiable rigor on occasion.

Beneath the seeming weakness of the Holy Family of Bethlehem was hidden a secret and an incomparable strength. It was precisely this humble setting and this poverty in spirit of Mary and Joseph, amid the simple hopes and cares of a little family, that the great thing, the immense thing, eclipsing all the grandeur of the Roman Empire, came to pass, as announced to shepherds:

And the angel said to [men keeping the night-watches over their flock]: Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people; For this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David.³

May the Lord, who was born in Bethlehem some two millennia ago, be born again in our souls and in our society, so that, once again, the darkness of sin and death may be pushed back and the great family of the Church and the little families of everywhere may continue to bring new life into the world and to protect it against every assault. Amen. Alleluia.

³ Lk. 2:10-11.